DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 385 838 CS 214 978

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TITLE "And Now I Can See": The Function of Conversion Narratives in the Discourse of Cultural Studies.
PUB DATE Mar 95
NOTE 14p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (46th, Washington, DC, March 23-25, 1995).
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Autobiographies; Critical Thinking; Feminism; Higher Education; Literary Criticism; Literary Genres; Literature Appreciation; *Multicultural Education; Personal Narratives; *Writing (Composition); *Writing Instruction; *Writing Research
IDENTIFIERS Academic Discourse Communities; *Conversion Narratives; *Cultural Studies

ABSTRACT

If educators are to realize the power of the link between cultural studies and composition studies, they must examine the cultural codes that govern their own professional discourse as teachers of writing. They must accept the responsibility for their own acts of literacy in describing pedagogical practices, in reporting their research, and in theorizing about language and learning. One particular code commonly employed in writing research is the conversion narrative. An examination of an article by Richard E. Miller, which appeared in the April 1994 issue of "College English," illustrates some of the complexities and difficulties inherent in the conversion narrative, particularly as a genre in which student transformations are recorded. Borrowing James Phelan's terminology for discussing the multidimensional nature of characters in texts--namely, the synthetic, mimetic, and thematic aspects of character--scholars must discover some of the pitfalls in proffering a student's narrative of his/her own conversion as evidence of the effectiveness of a particular pedagogy or approach. (Contains nine references.) (TB)

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Jane Greer

"'And Now I Can See': The Function of Conversion Narratives In the Discourse of Cultural Studies"

Citing the interdisciplinary nature of composition studies and the willingness of composition scholars to embrace diverse topics and methodologies, John Schilb has argued for a connection between composition and cultural studies. Schilb writes that under a cultural studies rubric, "students may find composition not a distressing trial of the self but a stimulating exploration of global forces," and composition can become "not a plodding servant of other disciplines but a key force in the diagnosis of the contemporary world" (188). Similarly, James Berlin has argued that the forging of a link between composition and cultural studies creates a particularly forceful oppositional alternative that not only challenges distinctions between a "sacred poetics" and "profane rhetoric" but that also, and more importantly, allows students to resist and to negotiate the cultural codes and social semiotics that structure their lives (49).

If, however, we are to realize fully the power of a link between cultural studies and composition, we must examine the cultural codes that govern our own professional discourse as teachers of writing; we must accept the responsibility for own acts of literacy in describing pedagogical practices, in reporting our research, and in theorizing about language and learning. I would like to take an initial step in that direction today by examining conversion narratives as a particular cultural code, a code that often undergirds our teacher-talk when we informally explain to colleagues the exciting happenings in our classrooms, a code that surfaces in the teaching guides for composition texts

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and readers, a code that appears in journal articles which describe classroom interactions. When passing a colleague in the hallway, we might mention that a particular student has finally seen the light and now recognizes the ways in which race and gender inequities affect Harriet Jacobs' language in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. Or we might notice that "Suggestions for Discussion" sections in the teaching guides for cultural studies-oriented composition readers promise us that when students are asked the right questions or are encouraged to analyze texts in a certain way they will "move beyond" facile generalizations or they will "step into new roles" as critical readers and writers. Since our writing classrooms are often seemingly chaotic sequences of cognitive and affective events, such micro-narratives of conversion conveniently allow us to measure progress and to plot significant changes in our students and in ourselves. Recent scholarship on conversion narratives reveals, however, that we should perhaps be wary of using such stories to highlight the efficacy of any pedagogy or teaching strategy.

Gerald Peters has worked to construct a genealogy of conversion discourse. While acknowledging that the notion of conversion is rooted in religious tradition, Peters documents the ways in which conversion discourse surfaces in various contexts. Conversion narratives have been offered up by liberals, by conservatives, and by those in between. Extending beyond the boundaries of any single ideological framework, conversion experiences have been recounted by tele-evangelists, feminists, people addicted to alcohol and drugs, medical scientists, by men, women, whites, people of color, and, of course, the list could on.

As Peters notes, though, the "migration of a narrative form does not ensure a continuity of content, [but] it does effect a kind of transference of its authorizing power" (6). And part of the "authorizing power" of conversion discourse lies in its ability to serve as a reliable index of the relationship between a self and larger cultures. Peter Dorsey's work on modern American autobiography has led him to conclude that virtually all conversion discourse serves "a socializing function, signifying that one had come into alignment with certain linguistic, behaviors, and cultural expectations" (8-9). Narrating their conversion experiences allows individuals to become empowered members of a particular population. By publicly testifying about their experiences, authors of conversion narratives participate in a social operation designed to induct them into a prevailing sociopolitical power structure, whether that power structure is the Catholic church, a corporate bureaucracy, a psychotherapy group, or a writing classroom. Conversion narratives can, thus, signal a denial of the self and an internalization of authority. Gerald Peters draws out more explicitly the potentially coercive nature of conversion discourse. According to Peters, conversion narratives can involve "not so much a divestment of an old self as . . . a denial and an imprisoning of that self and an identification with an Other by accepting a new identity as one's own prison guard" (34).

With such potential dangers, we need to be cautious about how we use conversion narratives in discussing pedagogy. And, we need to be particularly cautious about introducing conversion narratives into discussions of the connections between composition

and cultural studies. If, as Berlin has argued, cultural studies-oriented composition programs hold out the possibility of "more personally humane and socially equitable economic and political arrangements," we may do ourselves (and our students) a disservice by circulating overly-simplistic conversion narratives in support of a link between composition and cultural studies (50).

Let me now to turn to a particular conversion narrative. In the lead article in the April 1994 issue of *College English*, Richard E. Miller sensitively probes complex questions about what he calls "fault lines" or moments of unsolicited oppositional critique in our classrooms. Miller asks, "what exactly are we to say or do when the kind of racist, sexist, and homophobic sentiments now signified by the term 'hate speech' surface in our classrooms?" (391). Miller carefully and cogently argues that as teachers we need neither to "exile students to the penitentiaries or the psychiatric wards for writing offensive, anti-social papers," nor give free rein to our own "self-righteous indignation"; instead, Miller argues, we need to closely attend "to what our students say and write in an ongoing effort to learn how to read, understand, and respond to the strange, sometimes threatening, multivocal texts they produce" (408).

Near the conclusion of his argument, Miller includes a brief excerpt from a student's paper in which the student describes his experience in reading Gloria Anzaldúa's "Entering into the Serpent." The student begins by noting that "Even though I had barely read half of the first page, I was already disgusted," and then the student goes on to write that Anzaldúa's text moves from "an egocentric personal story to a femo-nazi account of central

american mythology" (404-405). The student concludes that Anzaldúa's "continuous references to females, sex, and the phallic symbols of snakes is most likely brought out by the lack of a man in her life" (405). After this excerpt from the student's paper, Miller explains that this is "not an uncommon response" to an assignment that asked students to explore the difficulties of Anzaldúa's text, and, for Miller, "Taking offense at this student's response to Anzaldúa's essay strikes me as being exactly the wrong tactic" (405). Miller goes on to explain that the assignment that solicited this response pushes students to go beyond their initial difficulty with the text and to "read their own readings and chart out alternative ways of returning to the text" (406). Miller then introduces the following excerpt from the writing of the same student:

> If not for searching for her hidden motives and then using them to criticize/bash Anzaldúa and her story, I would not have been able to read the story in its entirety. Although my view is a bit harsh, it has been a way that allows me to counter Anzaldúa's extremities. In turn, *I can now see* her strategy of language and culture choice and placement to reveal the contact zone in her own life. All of my obstacles previously mentioned, (not liking the stories, poems, or their content) were overcome by "bashing" them. Unfortunately, doing that in addition to Anzaldúa's ridiculous disproportionism and over-intense, distorted beliefs created a mountain which was impossible for me to climb. This in effect made it impossible to have taken any

> part of her work seriously or to heart. I feel I need to set aside my personal values, outlook, and social position in order to escape the bars of being offended and discouraged. Not only must I lessen my own barriers of understanding, but I must be able to comprehend and understand the argument of the other. It is these differences between people and groups of people that lead to the conflicts and struggles portrayed and created by this selection. (406, italics added)

The student's phrase "I can now see," and the apparent earnestness of his concluding statements about how he "must" lessen his own barriers of understandings causes me to read his text as a conversion narrative. But how are we to discern whether this student's conversion is "not so much a divestment of the old self . . . as an imprisoning of that self and an acceptance of a new identity as one's own prison guard" (Peters 34)?

Before I try to answer this question, let me be clear that I very much value Professor Miller's work. I choose to discuss his article today because I think it represents some of the best work done on the complicated questions that arise when cultural studies and composition come together. My intention here is not to find fault with the important work he has done; instead, I seek only to use this particular conversion narrative as a touchstone to help us consider ways we might check ourselves when we offer up conversion narratives and when we hear them.

Borrowing some tools from narrative theory can, I think, help us understand how this particular conversion narrative functions. In the *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, Charles J.G. Griffin has noted

that conversion experiences complicate the problem of what Walter Fisher has called 'characterological coherence' or the organized actional tendencies identified within a given narrative persona. As Griffin notes, "An authentic conversion experience necessarily threatens characterological coherence because it disturbs the basic patterns of motive and behavior that have characterized the writer's life up to that point" (160). By offering these excerpts from the student's writing which document the student's movement from seeing Anzaldúa as a femo-nazi to seeing Anzaldúa as a person struggling with the contact zones in her own life, Miller certainly creates the potential for a disruption of the student's characterological coherence. At the most basic level, such a radical disruption can raise questions about the sincerity of the student and the believability of the student's conversion.

I think, though, that we can move to an even more finely textured analysis of how this student functions as a converted character and about the function of this conversion narrative. In his book *Reading People, Reading Plots*, James Phelan offers us a more refined terminology for discussing the multidimensional nature of the characters we meet in texts. Phelan suggests that characters are "composed of three components, the mimetic, the thematic, and synthetic" (3). For Phelan, the mimetic dimensions of a character involve that character's possession of recognizable traits: being tall, having a raspy voice, fidgeting in class, etc. Characters assume thematic dimensions when they are "taken as a representative figure, as standing in for a class"(3)--white, middle-income university students, the individual in modern society, etc. This representativeness then supports some

proposition allegedly made by the creator of the character through his/her text. Finally, the synthetic dimension of a character is the constructed nature of the character, the sense that this character is a creation of authorial ingenuity.

Returning now to the character of the student we encounter in Professor Miller's article, we might ask ourselves how the mimetic, thematic, and synthetic dimensions of the student are constructed and how they function in his conversion narrative. First, the mimetic. From the student's own text and his use of the term "femo-nazi" we can deduce that the student is conversant with the rhetoric of Rush Limbaugh. We also learn from the student that he is uncomfortable and unwilling to read words that are not English. But we really know little else about this student. Although the student tells us in the second excerpt that he needs to set aside his "personal values, outlook, and social position," as readers we have no idea what this outlook or social position is. We are not privy to the student's race, his social or economic status, sexual orientation, family history, or religious or educational background. We do not know whether the student argues vociferously in the classroom for positions similar to his initial stance toward Anzaldúa. Or perhaps he is a friendly, quiet student who listens attentively to both his fellow students and teacher? We don't know if this student is struggling to maintain a "C" average that will allow him to hang on to a desperately needed scholarship or whether the student is striving for an "A" that will help him gain admission to prestigious professional or graduate schools. Such complicating and sometimes confounding mimetic particularities are what allow us to

understand and assess characterological coherence, and, in this case, such mimetic details would give us a more concrete basis for accepting the student's conversion as understandable or rejecting it as unbelievable. Without such mimetic details it is difficult for us to gauge the depths of the student's initial aversion to Anzaldúa or to measure how far the student has traveled when he tells us "I can now see."

Furthermore, Professor Miller does not foreground the synthetic nature of the student as a created character. Miller prefaces the student's excerpt only with the phrase, "Here's how one of my student's described his experience reading 'Entering Into The Serpent'" (404). As Phelan documents in *Reading People, Reading Plots*, there are numerous ways in which the synthetic dimensions of a character can be foregrounded: authorial or narratorial asides, the actions or speeches of other characters, or even by character names and descriptions. In this case, the student might have been named "Mr. Femonazi-Turned-Critical-Reader" or borrowing the student's own metaphor, we might be introduced to him as "Mountain-Climber." While such names might sound extravagant or even downright goofy, they deliberately call attention to the fact that the student-as-character is an authorial construct and that he fulfills a particular function in Professor Miller's argument. Alternatively, Professor Miller might have chosen a direct authorial address to acknowledge that any reading (including his own) of the student's text is one of many stories that might be constructed from this particular encounter with Anzaldúa. Instead, the student's text is presented as a natural, neutral artifact that speaks for itself and provides

a transparent window into the student's mind. This lack of foregrounding of the synthetic nature of the student as character helps to naturalize the conversion narratives and foreclose questions about the ways this narrative has been refracted through Professor Miller's own discourse.

While this student has almost no mimetic dimensions and the synthetic dimensions of the student as a constructed character are not foregrounded, the character of the student does fulfill an important thematic function in Professor Miller's argument. Having talked at length in earlier sections of his essay about the difficult task of responding to offensive remarks in the classroom, Miller has, by the end of the essay, placed himself in a position where he needs to offer constructive, concrete ideas about dealing with this problem. The excerpts from the student's response to Anzaldúa allow Miller to complete his argument. The student's role is to stand in as a representative for all the students who bring their uninvited and perhaps offensive oppositionality to the classroom. The student's "conversion" and his professed commitment to return to Anzaldúa's text with a more open mind is the support Miller needs for his proposition that we should closely attend to the strange, sometimes threatening, multivocal texts of our students.

By capitalizing on the thematic dimensions of this particular student/character while minimizing his synthetic and mimetic dimensions, Miller makes it difficult for us to assess the student's characterological coherence and answer questions about the sincerity of the student's conversion. In this particular case, the interaction of the synthetic, mimetic, and thematic can

only leave us uncomfortably wondering if the student has not merely, perhaps temporarily, imprisoned a part of himself, choosing to accept the identity of "critical reader" and becoming his own prison guard. We can read his "I can now see" conversion as an attempt to become an empowered member of Professor Miller's classroom, but we are in no position to judge whether the student has for convenience's sake (or for the sake of his GPA) merely internalized the authority of his teacher.

I would like to conclude then today, not by suggesting that we completely censor ourselves whenever we feel the temptation to offer a conversion narrative in support of a link between composition and cultural studies or in support of any pedagogy or program of study. Kimberly Rae Connor's work on the conversion narratives of African American women and philosopher Mary Midgley's explorations of connections between women's commitment to the feminist moment and religious experience both suggest that conversion discourse can empower people. The lives and texts of people like Frederick Douglass, Rebecca Jackson, and Rigoberta Menchu are powerful testaments to the ability of conversion narratives to help accomplish liberatory goals not only in the lives of individuals but for marginalized groups as well. I hope my presentation today has pointed out, though, that we need to be cautious in constructing and circulating conversion narratives. Examining the mimetic, thematic, and synthetic dimensions of our students as converted characters can be a start toward critically reading our own discursive practices as composition professionals. This is especially critical as we seek to link cultural studies and composition in an attempt, as James Berlin has said, to

demystify literacy practices and to help students "understand that language is never innocent . . . [and] is the scene where different conceptions of economic, social, and political conditions are contested" (51). If cultural studies is to fulfill this potential, then we should accept the responsibility of investigating our own language practices as we construct conversion narratives.

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